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A Long-Term Analysis Of Social Networks Of Students From A University Program For Seniors

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Abstract

Most important conceptualizations of quality of life have in their definitions three basic pillars: psychical dimension, psychological dimension and social dimension (OMS, 1948, Schalock and Verdugo, 2003; Walker, 2010). In this communication we focus our attention on the last dimension, in detail how the long life learning could improve seniors' quality of life. The purpose of this study is to analyze social networks of the seniors' students in the *Universitat Oberta per a Majors* (UOM), -an educational program intended to adults over 50 years- from 2006-2007 to 2011-2012 academic years. Method: Application of social support questionnaire. A total of 261 questionnaires were used for the analysis by SPSS program. Dimensions evaluated were: lost relationships (and sources) versus new relationships (and sources), feeling of loneliness, perception of changes on their social network from to 5 years before and for next 5 years and influence of the educative program in these changes. Findings and results: Most of the sample affirm that lost relationships of working environment, but in general they have increased their social network; rarely they have loneliness feelings and they think that their social network will be stable during next 5 years. They considered that UOM program have a strongly positive effect in their social networks. Conclusions and recommendation: positive effects of long life learning are demonstrate in this study, specifically improving social networks' senior students

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1. Introduction

The increase in life expectancy, the progressive increment of demographic aging and the social, cultural and economic situation of the elderly population have caused, especially in the developed countries, a continuous

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interest in the dissemination of culture and the education of elderly people. It has occurred, and is being generalized, that the majority of institutions, including universities, give open access to this collective, and the development of formative proposals for people aged over 50 is being given much weight. Since the appearance of the first educational and cultural offers, different purposes and models of programs for elderly people have been elaborated with the aim of providing permanent education and improving their level of physical, mental, social and cultural health, as well as their quality of life, in general. Education has traditionally been aimed at a particular age group, and once overcome this age, people could not continue studying or simply increase or update their knowledge. This situation has changed, and according to Orte and March (2006), one of the most significant facts that characterize the social reality of the more developed countries is the generalization process of education to all sectors of society. We share the ideas of the before mentioned authors to assert the existence of a democratization of education which has reached all sectors of society, and has made possible the idea of learning throughout life, of lifelong learning, which affects all groups of people, regardless of age or other personal circumstances. As indicated in March (2008), one of the major challenges faced by the educational system, since its legal institutionalization and the consolidation of the right to education for all citizens, has been the real achievement of the democratization of education, providing for equality in opportunities for the entire population. The concern about issues related to the gerontological field, and its relationship to other areas, is becoming more common, and even relevant institutions, such as UNESCO, begin worrying about aging around 1958. However, it is in 1974 when at its 18th General Conference it refers to the union of aging and education, and endows it with content and specific budget. Continuing on the international scale we have to make reference to the 5th International Conference on Adult Education, organized by UNESCO, held in Hamburg in July 1997. This conference is known as the Hamburg Declaration, and it is here where the foundation to make lifelong learning a reality was laid. As Martínez and Criado (2008: 35) indicate:

The growing demand and supply of formative courses for seniors attracts the interest of institutions, organizations, etc., and of the involved people, by choosing a way that is oriented toward an active aging through personal fulfillment. In this sense, the desire for knowledge, thereby taking advantage of the opportunities, could not be reached because of economic, political or personal circumstances.

As mentioned above, the universities, as an institution of higher education, have opened their doors to the group of elderly people providing a wide range of possibilities. The Balearic Islands are no exception and the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB) has been developing the University Program for Seniors, known as *Universitat Oberta per Majors (UOM)*, more than fifteen years ago. It is an educational and cultural project aimed at the elderly population, under the auspices of the university and the support of national and regional social institutions, and in some cases, of educational institutions, as for example, in the Balearic Islands (Orte and March 2006). We are not talking about a senior university but about a program, courses, etc., officially recognized, and offered by some public and private Spanish universities. The designation of university programs for seniors is the name that has been agreed by the representatives of this type of programs, respecting the proposal of the Ministry which says that only centers recognized as such can be called universities. At a national level, these programs were initiated systematically in the academic year 1993-1994 (Orte, Macías and Vives, 2008). The UOM consists of different programs developed throughout the geographical territory of the Balearic Islands (Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza and Formentera). In the academic year 1998-1999 the program was launched on campus with 32 students. From this moment, the program expanded to the towns in Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza and Formentera, thus achieving a university project for seniors which is near and adequate to the territory and to the students in each of the islands. The UOM is already an established project with a broad social impact, especially among people over 50. Therefore, we intend to expand the objectives that were raised from the beginning and go on adapting them to a changing situation, of both the society and our reference group, always with the intention of raising awareness of the older people in our community and foster an active and positive aging. In this case, to carry out the study we will build on the program that is being developed on campus. The Senior Diploma of the UOM (*Diploma Sènior de la UOM*) is a proper title of the UIB, of 500 hours. It consists of three academic years of 160 hours each, plus 20 compulsory hours which are intended for the final project of the diploma that students must do in the third course to obtain the corresponding title or certification. Each year is comprised of courses of all areas of knowledge that can be taken at the UIB. The subjects the students have to take are divided into: compulsory, optional and complementary activities. In the last course, the students have to choose between doing a project of ethnographic research and getting involved in a volunteer project, which can be both in the social field and in the area of education and culture. While the former is directed toward the students who have interests in research and in developing their skills and abilities in that area, the latter is

for people whose personal interests are more related to solidarity issues and who want to expand upon them, or topics they are not familiar with but would like to know more about.

2. Methodology

During five academic years (from 2007-2008 to 2011-2012), a longitudinal study was carried out on the social relationships of the students of the UOM. Data was recollected through a close-ended questionnaire based on the principal questionnaires for social support of elderly people (Fernández-Ballesteros, 1996; Medina and Carbonell, 2004; Gómez, Verdugo, Arias and Navas, 2008) and on a consultation with experts about its first version. The questionnaire includes three principal blocs: sociodemographic data, information about social relationships and data about social support. Our principal hypothesis is: having participated in the Universitat Oberta per a Majors produces significant and positive changes in the social networks of the assessed senior students. Therefore, the results in the variables were analyzed: lost relationships, earned relationships, the origin of each, sense of loneliness and changes in the social network during the last 5 years, perception of its maintenance at the present and of the social network in 5 years' time, and the effect the UOM had on their social relationships. The selected group is a collective of students from the Senior Diploma of the UOM, since it is a stable and formal group, with features that allow a continuous evaluation. The inclusion criterion was to be a Senior Diploma student in the academic years mentioned above and being over 55 years old. The total sample presents 369 Senior Diploma students from the Universtitat Oberta per a Majors.

3. Results

Concerning the participants, 59.1% are women, of which 63.1% are between 60 and 69 years old (26.3% are older than 69 and 10.6% are younger than 60). 65.5% were born in the autonomous community of the Balearic Islands and their marital status is mostly married (62.3%); 17.3% are widowed, 12.5% separated or divorced and 7.3% single. The percentage of married students is almost the same as people who live with their partner or with their partner and children (63.1%); 26.6% live alone and 8.9% with other relatives. Regarding education, 38.8% have non-compulsory non-university education (6.5% university studies) or primary education (31.4%). Most of them are retired (43.4%) or early retirees (13.3%). As shown in the following table (Table 1), there are more earned than lost relationships, in this sense, more than half of the participants assure that they have not lost any relationship in the last year (53.5%), while they won some (42.5%) or few. It should be noticed that the losses are usually friends or relatives (16.5% in both cases), work colleagues (26.3%) or acquaintances from some associations or clubs (24.9%); especially from the UOM (34.1%).

Table 1. Lost relationships vs. earned relationships

	Lost relationships	Earned relationships
Many	2,7%	19,0%
Some	14,6%	42,5%
Few	25,5%	23,3%
None	53,5%	8,7%
No answer	3,8%	6,5%

Truth is that these data may help understand that the respondents do not feel lonely, in fact, 74.3% rarely or hardly ever have a sense of loneliness; 5.4% feel lonely often and 17.3% sometimes. It is noteworthy that a possible cause for that is the valuation of their social network. In this sense, we must understand the importance of the network being active, and that, in case it should be needed, it will be activated. Related to this issue, the students notice that if they needed their network in a period of time that is considered of medium term (5 years), it would be maintained. 35.2% of the informants have this perception often and 24.4% sometimes.

Finally, we highlight the results about the perception of the social network within 10 years; that is, the perception of the changes their social network underwent in the last 5 years and the feeling they have of its maintenance within 5 years. As shown in Table 2, the perception is of a stable social network (40.9% consider that it remains the same for 5 years and that within 5 years it will not have changed, 43.6%) or, at most, it has increased (36%) during the last 5 years or will increase (25.5%).

Table 2. Perception of changes in the social network (5 years)

	Changes in the network (5 years ago)	Changes in the network (within 5 years)	
It has increased	36%	25,5%	It will increase
It has decreased	14,4%	9,2%	It will decrease
It remains the same	40,9%	43,6%	It will remain the same
Do not know/ no answer	8,7%	21,7%	Do not know/ no answer

4. Conclusions

As mentioned in the previous sections, the importance of elderly people becomes increasingly more relevant, not only because of their exponential increase at a global scale but also because of the numerous contributions this group can make to society, reaching from the family to a macro social level. However, these contributions have to break through barriers and myths that gradually disappear. The first obstacle that needs to be overcome is the negative self-perception of oneself when reaching a certain age. A positive self-perception, valuing the own potential and abilities and, thus, lifelong learning, as much as the active aging policies, play a decisive role in the quality of life of elderly people. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the importance of the proper use of leisure time and the proven benefits of lifelong learning, with particular emphasis on the effects of university programs for seniors. That is why perception plays an important role when valuing the dimension of social support in the quality of life of each person. In this sense, our focus was placed on the social network. Our first goal was to help to understand the positive and stable effects on the social networks that derive from the university senior programs, meaning that these not only enhance pleasure and desire for learning, but, at the same time, have a positive impact on their social network. The second objective was to help breaking the negative myths about older people and their social environment. The study shows that there are more earned than lost relationships, therefore, this should make us reflect on the benefits of educational programs for seniors. Not only do these programs provide formative opportunities that allow the development of skills and abilities which the students had not been able to develop in earlier times, but they are also a direct benefit for their social networks and, therefore, their quality of life. In this sense, the students themselves are the ones who point out that friendships are the social source where most changes occur. On the one hand, these are one of the most frequently cited sources of losses (together with the family); on the other hand, the sample shows that it is also where most relationships are won. Possibly, an explanation for these changes is that they share the space, weekly and on a regular basis, with other people that are enrolled in the same Senior Diploma; people who occasionally become colleagues (increase of the social network through associations, clubs or UOM) or friends (increase of the social network through friendships). Another point we should consider is the feeling of loneliness; our results demystify the direct relationship between elderly people and loneliness, and they differentiate being alone from feeling lonely. It is possible that these results help understand why the evaluated seniors perceive their social network as solid and stable throughout time, since most of them not only feel that it has not changed significantly in the last 5 years, but also that it will not change in the 5 years to come and, if there were any changes, it is more probable to be (or have been) an increase and not a decrease. Thus, considering the latter perception, we may understand that apart from seeing positive changes at a quantitative level (increase in relationships), the evaluated seniors also perceive their social network as being of quality, because they understand that the people who are part of it would remain as a support for a medium term (5 years) if needed. Finally, we propose a deeper analysis of these preliminary findings through various avenues of research. It would be interesting to know the results differentiated through some socio-demographic variables that have proved to be significant in various studies (Lin, Ensel, Simeone, and Kuo, 1979; Medina and Carbonell, 2004); such variables may be gender, age, level of coexistence and educational level. Another issue worth doing research on is whether the feeling of loneliness, the loss of social relations or the negative perception of the social network correspond with the transverse

moment of the investigation (proximity of retirement, death of a relative/ friend or independence from the children) or with a more stable and permanent vision of the social network.

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